



The Ultimate Price

LI man's drive for better life led him into harm's way

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When she spotted the two people outside her Bay Shore beauty shop, one of the them in a crisp Army uniform, Cathy Heigher cut short her telephone conversation and quickly hung up. Her chest tightened, and her breathing came in struggling gasps.



She blinked, hoping her eyes were playing tricks on her. But the two figures were still there. And they had started toward her.

"The minute they walked through the door, it was as if I was seeing ghosts," remembered Heigher, a diminutive woman whose eyes moistened as she recently recalled that day. "I said, 'No, I'm not seeing them standing in front of me. I knew why they were there, getting ready to tell me my son was dead. I don't even remember what they looked like. All I remember is that they were standing there with papers in their hand, and I wanted them to disappear.'"

On that misty July morning, Bay Shore learned it had lost Raheen Heigher, the grandson of migrant workers and the son of a convict, who had promised his mother he would follow in her footsteps to college and success.

To pay for higher education, the tall, buff, square-shouldered member of the Brentwood High School Class of 2000 decided to join the U.S. Army a year after he graduated, so that his dreams of getting an education in finance would not burden his family.

The decision cost him his life.

Pfc. Heigher, 22, who was with the 2/230th Field Artillery of the 101st Airborne Division, was one of three soldiers killed during a July 24 ambush near Qayyarah, in northern Iraq.

"In the end, he became just like myself -- driven to success," his mother said. "He went into the military because he wanted to go to college full time. That was his plan to achieve his ultimate goal. At 22, he was just like me. He was going to do whatever it took."

The lure of enlisting in the military as a way of securing a steady paycheck and earning a degree is significant in sections of Long Island where joblessness is high, money is tight and schools struggle.

The U.S. Army is encouraging black youths to attend its "Campus Combat" minority recruitment fair Wednesday at Stony Brook University. The Army hired New York-based Vital

Marketing Group, an African-American-focused advertiser, to help promote the tour, which features rap music and giveaways, including the hip-hop magazine The Source.

Already, recruitment in America's black communities is running strongly. Blacks make up 26.8 percent of Army recruits, more than twice the proportion of blacks in the U.S. population, the Pentagon says.

Betty Greene, a dean at Brentwood High School, said about 200 students participate in a Reserve Officers Training Corps program at the school.

In nearby Bay Shore, where "for rent" signs in vacant shops bespeak of the community's economic vulnerability, uniformed officers at a U.S. Armed Forces recruitment office tout the benefits of enlisting.

One recruiter there said an enlistee could earn \$300 to \$350 per week to start, plus a full scholarship and money for books and expenses.

"I know for many of our students who want more than a poor community, that may be a way out," said Greene, who taught Heighter in an eighth-grade home economics class.

By all accounts, Heighter, a self-described average student, was determined to put his mediocre grades behind him, and rise toward success.

But like many of today's young recruits, he came from a challenged background.

Only months after Raheen was born, his father, Lonnie Moore, was sent to prison for 8 years after a liquor store robbery that netted \$20 and a small bottle of vodka.

His mother juggled the need to support the infant Raheen and his older brother, Glynn, on her own, while also furthering her education. In the early 1980s, a typical day for her consisted of working a part-time job driving a YMCA bus, going into Manhattan for evening classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology, then rushing back to Long Island to work the overnight shift at a state hospital for mentally handicapped children.

Meanwhile, she was scraping together money to send Raheen to parochial schools, feeling he needed the extra attention.

When her husband returned from prison in 1988, Cathy Heighter said she helped set him up in the construction business. Their marriage collapsed seven years ago. Moore, who remained in contact with Raheen after the divorce, could not be reached for an interview.

Heighter said she supported her children and helped her husband, all while starting her own business. Today she owns the Beyond Images of Beauty hair salon on East Main Street in Bay Shore.

Through it all, she was never alone. The youngest of seven children, many of whom settled in Bay Shore, Cathy Heighter drew strength from her mother, her siblings and an extensive network of friends.

So did Raheen.

One of Raheen's uncles, Carl Adams, who had been a child laborer in Long Island's potato fields into the early 1960s, frequently invited the youngster to wrestling camps at Boston University. Adams, who was a two-time NCAA national wrestling champion before graduating from Iowa State University in 1972, has been head wrestling coach at Boston University for 23 years. "He had family all around him," Adams said. "He had uncles he could look to, as well as his dad."

Another uncle, Ronald Adams, lived nearby in Bay Shore. As a child, Raheen was constantly at his elbow, sharpening his curiosity by peppering his uncle with questions. "He started looking at us to be the man image that he wanted to be like, because his father wasn't around when he was young," Ronald Adams said.

As he entered his teens, Raheen grew tall and strong. He played football, and also could draw. And for at least some of his cousins, he began taking on the mentoring role his uncles had played for him.

One nephew, Xavier Mimms, 15, lived not far away from him. They went to South Shore Mall and played video games together. After enlisting in the Army, Raheen Heighter wrote Xavier from overseas.

In an April 20 letter from the Iraqi desert, he urged his nephew to choose friends carefully, to avoid the distraction of "nice cars, clothing and expensive women," and not to let opportunity pass him by.

"When I was in high school, I graduated in the middle of my class with a 74% average. You know what that got me? About four years of hard work behind the students with a 95% and above average," he wrote. "Right now, I'm being shot at, there are bombs exploding under vehicles I ride in, my buddies are getting hurt, and hazardous chemicals fill the air. I'm not trying to scare you, but I want you to know how hard life is. You have to grab it ... and do what it takes to become a successful man. I'm doing that, but you can take an easier route."

He also wished his military career could make it easier on his mother. Cathy Heighter suffers from sarcoidosis, a chronic inflammation that can attack any organ in the body. At times it strikes her lungs, making it hard for her to catch her breath.

And because she must stand while caring for her customers, it sometimes causes her knees and ankles to swell to the size of grapefruits. Often, Raheen would carry her to her car, or up and down the stairs of the Bay Shore apartment they shared.

But like many self-employed minority business owners, Cathy Heighter has no health insurance. So she either pays hundreds of dollars per month for prescriptions, or does without.

Raheen's hopes to help his mother were dashed by his death. He left behind a \$10,000 Army insurance policy, for which 60 cents per month was deducted from his paycheck. Cathy Heighter is concerned that young soldiers go off to war with so little coverage, and spoke recently in support of legislation proposed by Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington). It would require the Pentagon to supply active duty soldiers with a minimum of \$100,000 in life insurance.

Raheen had counted on coming home alive, and supporting his mother with his earnings. In the last two years of his life, he had begun reading about financial investing. He expressed an interest in returning home, acquiring a stock broker's license and earning enough money to

help his family.

In his letters, he expressed faith that the war was over, and that he would be back in Bay Shore by August. "We have totally Saddam from power and now we are in the liberation process," he wrote, 26 days after President George W. Bush landed in a Navy jet on an aircraft carrier, then declared that major combat in Iraq was over. "I'm eating good, working out and reading good literature now that the war is over."

In another letter to his mother last spring, he wrote, "I have your picture in my helmet, and you are the reason I need to get home safe."

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